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fort massac

STATE PARK



THE PARK

Fort Massac, one of five former French forts in the Illinois Park system, borders the Ohio River on the southern tip of the state. In 1903, through the efforts of The Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, 24 acres surrounding the fort site were purchased by the state. Since then acquisition has brought the total acreage to 1,381.

HISTORY

Fort Massac has many legends and traditions associated with it. Because of the fort's strategic position on the Ohio River it is believed the site was first fortified by the Indians. Tradition has it that the place was used as early as 1654 by De Soto and his Spaniards to protect themselves from the Indians.

French: The first use by the French of this site was in 1702. A trading post was set up by M. Juchereau de St. Denis for securing buffalo hides at the Grand Chain of Rocks to the northwest about 15 miles away. The post chaplain, Father Mermet, established near here a mission called Ascension or Assumption, which often has mistakenly been placed at Fort Massac. The fort site, however, because of its excellent situation was probably one of a number of outposts of the Grand Chain of Rocks establishment.

The Grand Chain of Rocks was located on the Ohio River southwest of Fort Massac and was a French occupation prior to Ft. Massac, used primarily for trade with the Indians. Its name was acquired from the rapids in the Ohio.

The fort was used intermittently over the years as a trading post and mission, but was not extensively fortified until 1757 by Charles Philippe Aubry, when it was learned the British were planning to send a war party to the Mississippi River. It is said that in the fall of 1757 the only real attack upon the fort was made by the Cherokee Indians, who were successfully repulsed.

Fort Massac was the last Ohio fort erected by the French and was used by them until the country was surrendered to the English. The fort was

under the control of Fort de Chartres and was an important link between there and the north and east.

British: Captain Thomas Sterling, who took over Fort de Chartres for the British, accepted the surrender of Fort Massac. The English made no effort to repair and maintain the site, although urged to do so by their military agents in the west. This fact made it easier for George Rogers Clark and his men, "The Long Knives," to enter the Illinois country at Massac Creek just east of the fort. There they hid their boats and proceeded on foot to Kaskaskia, which they captured the evening of July 4, 1778, for the state of Virginia and the young United States of America. According to Clark's account of his landing and trip overland to Kaskaskia, he did visit the fort site but the story that the flag of the United States flew here for the first time in Illinois is a matter of conjecture since historians don't agree about this point.

Fort Massac was not used by troops again until 1794 when trouble began between France and Spain. President George Washington ordered it rebuilt and occupied to control part of the population from taking sides and joining the Spaniards. By the Treaty of Greenville with the Indians in 1795, the land of the fort was conveyed to the United States through the efforts of General "Mad Anthony" Wayne. On April 27, 1790, the County of St. Clair was set up as part of the Northwest Territory with the boundaries including all of Illinois south of the Illinois River and west of a line drawn from the mouth of the Mackinaw River to Fort Massac on the Ohio River.

The Fort Abandoned: As late as 1812 the fort was repaired and occupied by a Tennessee regiment. By 1814 the frontier had moved beyond Fort Massac and it was abandoned and never used again. For over 40 years there was agitation in and out of Congress for a national armory to be established on one of the western waters. After examining 48 possible sites, army officers named to make this selection recommended in 1843 that Fort Massac would be the most suitable spot. The project finally fell through and the armory was subsequently located at Rock Island.

The American fort was allowed to fall into ruin over the remains of the French fortifications and the leveling procession of the years began leaving a grass covered plateau and mound.

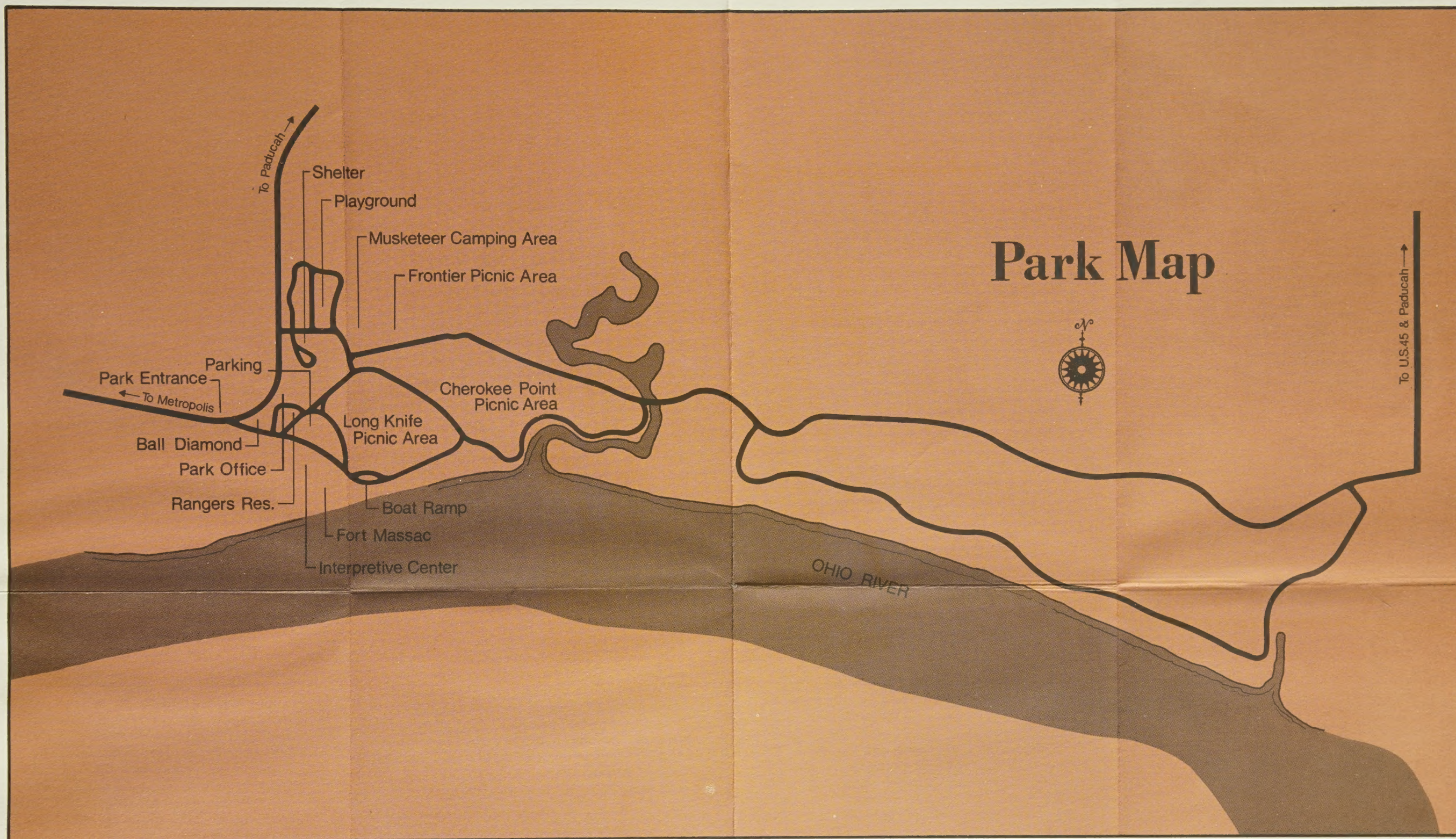
FORT RECONSTRUCTION

Of particular interest at the park is the archaeological work that was done at the fort site with WPA labor. 4,625 sacks of artifacts were collected, each sack representing the collection from a six-inch layer in a five-foot square of excavation. Each sack has had its artifacts cleaned and classified. Analysis of this material has been carried out far enough to show the major characteristics of the forts.

As more historical data was known about the American Fort Massac than about the previous French fort and because the American fort held more historical significance than did the French, it was decided to reconstruct the American version. The reconstruction was placed just easterly of the original site of the two forts in order to maintain a proper perspective of distance from the Ohio River that was the case in 1794, and to prevent the destruction of the site of the French fort, upon which the original American Fort Massac was later built.

Actual reconstruction of the fort and the accompanying Interpretive Center began in the fall of 1971, but due to extended periods of bad weather, the project was not completed until late summer of 1973. Presently, the reconstructed fort contains only the four blockhouses in the corner bastions, used as living quarters for enlisted men and as means of defense with loopholes for muskets and ports for cannons. The officers' barracks, well, powder magazine and mess kitchens have not been reconstructed.

The Interpretive Center contains displays and a short slide program dealing with the history of Fort Massac. In addition to maps and paintings, there is a representative sample of artifacts on display from the excavations of the two forts. The Interpretive Center and restored fort are open Wednesday through Sunday from 9:30 to 5:00. Guided tours of the site are available on these days by making prior arrangements with the Park Interpreter.



FACILITIES

Picnicking: There are four picnic areas with tables, outdoor stoves, drinking water and playground equipment.

Fishing and Boating: Both are permitted on and along the Ohio River. One boat launch is available.

Camping: Tent and trailer sites are available, but there is no electricity or trailer disposal. Visitors must obtain a camping permit from the park personnel. Group camping is allowed; groups of over 25 need advance permission to enter the park.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION . . .

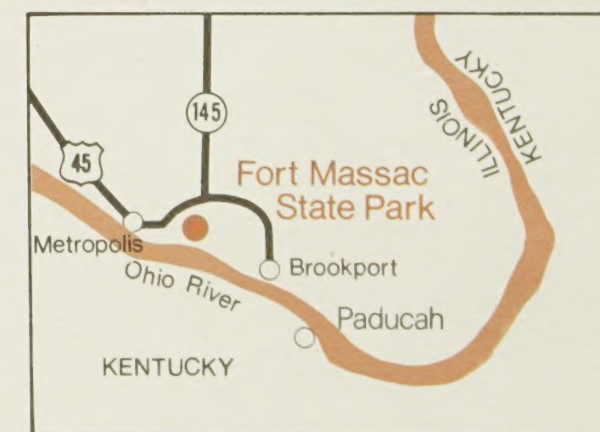
Admittance will not be granted groups of 25 or more persons to any state park or conservation area unless permission from the park ranger has been secured to use the facilities. It is also required that groups of minors have adequate supervision and that at least one responsible adult accompany each group not exceeding 15 minors. All pets must be on a leash.

Numerous state parks and memorials are within easy access of every part of the state. Lodges, cabins and dining rooms are important features of Illinois Beach, Starved Rock, Pere Marquette,

White Pines Forest and Giant City. Reservations for lodging should be made with lodge managers.

All state parks are open the year round. When weather conditions necessitate the closing of park roads during freezing and thawing periods, access to park facilities is by foot only.

For more details about this site, contact Ranger, Box 708, Metropolis, 62960. Phone 618/524-4712. For information on other Illinois sites, write the Department of Conservation, Information/Education Section, State Office Building, Springfield, 62706.





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